

The Home Visit

By Melody Patton, MBA

Creating Connections & Building Relationships with Parents

Humans are socio-emotional beings—we have a strong interest in the social world around us, and any time we encounter a new situation, we are motivated to orient ourselves to it and to understand it. We want to feel loved and accepted, and we want to feel valued as unique individuals. This interest in the socio-emotional world around us begins at birth and is no less important as we grow older (Santröck, 2010, p. 306).

As teachers, one of the most important things we do is create relationships and connections with the children and parents with whom we work. The strength of the individual relationships we have with parents and children affects our daily interactions with them and can act as a foundation later, if difficult situations arise.

Home visits (for Infant & Toddler, Early Childhood, and perhaps Lower Elementary levels) are a great way for teachers to create an initial connection with a child and his family. The home visit allows the child to meet you for the first time in her own home, a place where she is already comfortable. The fact that parents invite you into the home communicates a level of comfort with you and shows that the parents trust you. This tells the child that you

are a “safe” person. When the parents welcome you and interact with you in their home, they are communicating to the child that you are a “friend” and that you can be trusted. In addition to helping the child establish a comfort level with you, the home visit shows parents that you have a genuine interest in getting to know them. By setting aside time specifically to talk with parents, you are showing them that they are an important part of the child’s school life. It also shows that you value them individually and that you want to connect with them personally. The time right before a child first starts school is a time when parents are most likely to feel vulnerable, unsure, and in need of support. This initial meeting helps put the parents at ease, creates an open dialogue where they can get their questions answered, and lets them know that you are there to support them as well as their child. This helps create the foundation upon which you can build a healthy relationship with them.

Home visits are one important component of an overall plan to facilitate a child’s transition to school. Other events might include parent orientation (where parents’ questions about the school program can be answered in a group setting), class-

room visits (where the parent and child visit the classroom together), and gradual transitions (special schedules that help ease a child into the school day). Ideally, a home visit would occur no more than 1 week before a child is scheduled to come to school alone for the first time. That way, the teacher is a familiar face on the first day of school, which goes a long way toward putting the child at ease.

Parents should be informed during the admissions and enrollment processes that a home visit is a part of the child’s transition to school. It is helpful if a letter is sent out ahead of time outlining the purpose and logistics of the home visit and to let parents know that their child’s teacher will contact them to schedule a time convenient for everyone. It should be a time when the child is not going to be tired or hungry, and when the child is more likely to feel playful and in a good mood. Home visits normally last at least 30 minutes but can be up to an hour, depending on the number of questions the parents have.

The teacher should come to the home visit with a list of topics and questions to discuss with parent(s). Depending on the age of the child, topics to discuss could include the

pregnancy and childbirth, the child's previous experiences away from home, the parents' expectations for the separation process, suggestions for how to best facilitate a positive separation, the child's interests, the home diapering routine, the child's experience with the toilet, allergies and food sensitivities, and medical conditions. The teacher should also be prepared to answer any questions the parents may have about Montessori, the school's specific program, or logistics for starting school. By allowing parents time to talk about their child (which every parent loves to do!) and by being open to their questions and concerns, the teacher is establishing a critical connection with parents and earning their trust.

It is ideal if the visit takes place somewhere in the home where the child has toys or activities nearby, so the adults can talk while the child plays. If the child wants to interact with the teacher or show the teacher one of his toys, then the teacher can engage with the child. If the child is not ready to engage, there is no reason to force interaction. One of the primary purposes of the home visit is to put the parent or parents at ease about the upcoming transition. If parents feel comfortable with the teacher and with the information given on the separation process at school, then the child will pick up on the parents' cues and be much more comfortable.

The home visit allows the teacher to observe the kinds of toys or activities the child enjoys at home and can offer clues about what activities might be of interest in the classroom. The visit is also an opportunity for the teacher to interact on a more personal level with the parents, talking about her own family and interests or sharing other personal information that might help create a bond with parents.

Home visits are not just for a child who has never attended school before. They are also a good practice to continue when a child is transitioning

Sample Home Visit Letter

Dear Parents,

We are pleased to introduce ourselves as your child's teachers, and we look forward to meeting with you and your child during the home visit. One of us will call you at the end of July to schedule a convenient day and time to meet before the start of the school year. Ideally, we would like to schedule these visits to occur the week before school starts.

This brief visit begins with a questionnaire that helps the teachers get to know your child. It also provides an opportunity for us to discuss questions you may have about the program, your child's preparation, and your expectations. It also gives your child the opportunity to get to know his/her teacher before the first day of school.

We look forward to our school year together.

Sample Home Visit Questionnaire

(for teachers to use during the home visit)

Name of Child _____ Birth Date _____

Date of Visit _____ Time of Visit _____

Parents' Names _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Class _____

What is your child's experience away from home, with and without family?

What are your expectations for the separation process?

Does your child have any security items (blanket, pacifier, etc.)?

What are some of your child's interests?

Who will be dropping off and picking up your child from school?

What is your routine around diapering or toileting at home?

Does your child have any health or medical problems/allergies or food sensitivities?

Do you have any other questions, thoughts, or concerns?

from one classroom to another (from the Toddler community to the Early Childhood classroom, for example). Your school may have other processes that help support the child who is making this transition, such as visiting the new classroom with his current teacher. However, parents are often in need of additional support during this time. After all, parents are also leaving behind a teacher with whom they have grown comfortable. A new classroom may seem overwhelming and intimidating to parents, especially if the class size is larger. Parents may worry that their child will get “lost” in this new, larger classroom. It is important for the new teacher to set aside this time to get to know parents and to begin establishing a relationship with them.

Some administrators or teachers may think, *We don't have time for home visits. We are already very busy.* The reality is that the time invested up front in conducting home visits will save significant time down the road. Teachers will have a better understanding of the child and his home environment and of the parents and any concerns or expectations they may have for their child. Teachers will also have a better

relationship with both the child and the parent from the beginning. Having knowledge about the child's interests and home environment makes it possible to introduce her to activities in the classroom environment that will be of interest on the first day of school. It also allows for more open communication with the parents, from the start, about possible questions or concerns that may arise.

Parents may worry that they and/or their home will be scrutinized when teachers come for a home visit. Reiterating the purpose of the home visit and reassuring them that the teacher is not coming to judge the home environment can put parents at ease. The teacher can also make it clear that the parents do not need to provide a meal or other entertainment. It also can be helpful to hold a parent orientation event at school before the home visit takes place, so the parents and the teacher have a chance to meet in person before the teacher visits the home. Once home visits become an established practice at your school, parents and school personnel alike will recognize their value and feel comfortable with the practice.

If you are not currently conducting home visits, I encourage you to make this a part of your practice for the coming year. Include information in your admissions and enrollment materials that explain their purpose and process. Prepare the letter you will send home to parents before the start of school, and develop a questionnaire teachers will use when visiting the home. Including home visits as a part of the transition plan for all children in your school is a decision you will never regret!

Reference

Santrock, J. W. (2010). *Child development: An introduction, 13th edition.* Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill Education.

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